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## **Academic Skills and Scholarship for Nurses: building aspiration and preparing nurses for academic success.**

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### **Abstract:**

*Academic Skills and Scholarship for Nurses is a pilot programme which addresses academic aspiration and study preparedness of mature aged students. It is a series of four workshops designed and implemented by QUT Library staff in collaboration with Nursing and Midwifery academics, for pre- and post- registration nursing staff within the region of Caboolture, Redcliffe and Kilcoy. The programme extends QUT Library's learning and study support expertise to the local community.*

*The intended outcomes of the programme are fourfold. Firstly, encourage educational aspirations of mature age students, to establish realistic expectations and practical strategies for beginning tertiary study. Secondly, skills developed will be congruent with lifelong learning principles and continuing professional development requirements of professional nursing bodies. Thirdly, alignment with QUT strategies for widening participation in higher education and finally, strengthen existing relationships between academic and professional staff, and QUT and the local community for the benefit of all stakeholders.*

### **The programme**

*Academic Skills and Scholarship for Nurses is a pilot programme which addresses the academic aspirations, expectations and preparedness of current nurses who may be considering university study. A series of four practical seminars have been designed and implemented by Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Library staff in collaboration with QUT Caboolture campus Nursing and Midwifery academics. The programme strengthens existing relationships between QUT and the local hospitals and non-acute health care facilities in Caboolture, Redcliffe and Kilcoy, and extends QUT Library's learning and study support expertise to the local community.*

QUT Library is actively engaged with teaching and learning, offering students access to a comprehensive suite of learning and study support services and resources which address both academic literacy (study skills) and information literacy (research skills). This blended portfolio

is delivered via a number of strategies catering for the learning needs of a diverse undergraduate cohort. Students access professional staff assistance at Learning and Research Desks, and by appointment for one-on-one Study Solutions sessions. Online learning and study support can be accessed 24/7 from resources including Studywell, PILOT, and Subject guides. In addition to these individual learning options, a comprehensive series of workshops is offered throughout the semester. These practical sessions cover generic study and writing skills as well as information literacy skills. QUT Library also partners with faculty to develop and deliver discipline-situated and embed curriculum teaching (Peacock, 2011). Building on these existing generic and discipline centered learning and study support services and resources, a series workshops specifically for nursing staff in the local region was developed.

The primary intended learning outcome of *Academic Skills and Scholarship for Nurses* is to develop realistic expectations and increase confidence about academic study. Secondary to this is to develop basic study skills and strategies, in order to assist with commencing student preparedness. The programme content includes basic computer skills, database research skills and academic reading and writing, including appropriate referencing styles. A short presentation to peers is the final product. The programme incorporates reflective practice and peer review, and as an authentic learning strategy students are encouraged to share experiences and relate skills to their current professional practice.

The pilot attendees were pre- and post- registration nursing staff. Registered Nurses (RN) interested in postgraduate study, and Enrolled Nurses (EN) and Assistants in Nursing (AIN) interested in undergraduate study were invited to attend the free programme. The first of the four workshops began with ten attendees, and eight completed the programme. Most attendees had no previous university experience; the RNs participating had been hospital trained. Interest is currently being sought for a second iteration of the programme scheduled for August 2011.

## **Impact**

The intended outcomes of the programme are fourfold. Firstly, encourage educational aspirations of mature age students, to establish realistic expectations and practical strategies for beginning tertiary study. Secondly, skills developed will be congruent with lifelong learning principles and continuing professional development requirements of professional nursing bodies. Thirdly, alignment with QUT strategies for widening participation in higher education and finally, strengthen existing relationships between academic and professional staff, and QUT and the local community for the benefit of all stakeholders.

The primary intention of the *Academic Skills and Scholarship for Nurses* programme is to increase self-efficacy and establish realistic expectations about university study. Fergy, Heatley, Morgan and Hodgson (2007), identify self confidence and self-efficacy as essential qualities for successful commencing students. Further, lack of confidence influences mature age student decisions to commence study (Osborne, Marks & Turner, 2004). Tinto (2009) and Kift, Nelson and Clarke (2010), assert that making expectations explicit is essential for student success and persistence in higher education. Participants in the *Academic Skills and Scholarship for Nurses* programme have a university experience and develop realistic ideas regarding workload and academic study expectations. Attendees develop a basic set of skills including basic research, academic writing and presentation skills. Student preparedness for academic output is an

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significant issue with implications for student retention (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). Nursing students can enter university with advanced standing of a full year's credit towards the undergraduate degree (Health and Community Services Workforce Council, 2010). Registered nurses may have received their qualifications prior to nursing education moving to the tertiary sector, and so have limited or no academic experience. Academic skill development is a key outcome of the programme. Attendees develop realistic expectations and key strategies to confidently engage in tertiary education.

Continued professional development (CPD) is requirement of professional nursing registration in Australia (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2010a). Registered nurses must actively engage in maintaining and broadening professional knowledge and developing professional skills. *Academic Skills and Scholarship for Nurses* contributes to the required nursing CPD, and so it has a direct and significant impact for the attendees' professional practice (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, 2010b). Evidence-based practice is encouraged and developed within current nursing education; it requires awareness of current research literature to inform best practice. All nurses require the skills to find and use current professional research to inform their practice. *Academic Skills and Scholarship for Nurses* develops skills to maintain current awareness in professional and research literature. In creating the programme, QUT Library consulted with the Caboolture Hospital librarian to ensure alignment with the Queensland health sector's current information environment. A well informed and professional nursing workforce is beneficial to the general community.

The *Review of Higher Education* (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) proposed increased targets for widening participation in Australian Universities. Students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are under-represented in Australian universities, and the new targets require 20% participation by 2020 (Bradley et. al). Nationally, only 10% of postgraduate students are from a low socioeconomic background, which is also a significant under-representation (Centre for the Study of Higher Education, 2008). Widening participation is a current strategic focus across QUT. *BluePrint3* (Queensland University of Technology [QUT], 2011), states increased student representation from low socioeconomic backgrounds as a key priority. Caboolture is part of the Northern Corridor Education Precinct (Delaforce, Adkins, & Buckley, 2005), a significant low socioeconomic community. *Academic Skills and Scholarship for Nurses* is an aspiration building programme designed specifically for potential mature age students within the Caboolture region. *Academic Skills and Scholarship for Nurses* raises the profile of QUT within the Caboolture community, and may potentially result in increased participation in higher education.

The development and implementation of *Academic Skills and Scholarship for Nurses* has been an opportunity for academic and professional staff collaboration. The existing successful relationship between Faculty and Library staff was the genesis of the programme, and this has been strengthened. Collaboration between professional and academic staff benefits both current and future students (Kift, Nelson & Clarke, 2010). Existing relationships between the QUT Nursing academics and the local acute and non-acute health facilities have also been strengthened, further benefiting all stakeholders. Engagement with the local community is a key priority for QUT Caboolture campus (QUT, 2011).

The intended outcomes of the pilot programme have been achieved. The local nursing community has been engaged with a university experience. Participants indicate a high level of satisfaction; that they have a better understanding of tertiary study expectations and feel more confident and prepared for academic study. They have also developed skills that are relevant to their current professional practice. QUT Library's learning and study support expertise was extended to the local community with potentially significant outcomes for the individual participants and the wider community.

### **The Nuts and Bolts session**

The first ten minutes of the session will be an outline of *Academic Skills and Scholarship for Nurses* programme, as described in this submission. Focus will be on the intended learning outcomes. Of particular interest is aspiration building among mature age students. This will provide the backdrop for a small group discussion activity. Focus questions for the audience will be about aspiration building for mature age students. In more general terms, strategies for addressing student preparedness will also be discussed. There will be an opportunity to report and discuss as a whole group. An outcome for the session will be to raise awareness of issues for mature age student participation in tertiary education, and to share strategies to engage mature age cohorts.

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